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Input from the Economic Commission for Europe to the high-level political forum on sustainable development

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat hereby transmits the input from the Economic Commission for Europe to the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

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I. Introduction

1. The sixty-sixth session of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), which served as a regional forum for sustainable development, was held from 14 to 16 April 2015. The Commission decided to transmit the high-level statement on the post-2015 development agenda and expected sustainable development goals in the ECE region, endorsed by its member States at the session, as the regional input to the 2015 high-level political forum on sustainable development. The statement may be found in document E/ECE/1475.

2. The Chair's summary of the high-level dialogue on the theme of the sixty-sixth session of the Commission, "Committing to action on sustainable development in times of change", is presented herewith for information purposes.

3. The Chair's summary of the high-level thematic discussions may be found in the biennial report of the Economic Commission for Europe for the period from 12 April 2013 to 16 April 2015 (see E/2015/37-E/ECE/1472, annex II). The thematic discussions addressed five areas, including: sustainable energy and resilient communities, sustainable management of ecosystems and natural resources, connectivity and competitiveness for sustainable lives, measuring and monitoring sustainable development and partnering for sustainable development.

II. High-level dialogue

Chair's summary

4. The high-level dialogue was moderated by the Ambassador/Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the United Nations Office at Geneva, Roderick van Schreven.

5. The Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Gennady Gatilov, emphasized that the world was still recovering from the 2008 global financial and economic crisis. A new paradigm of economic relations was needed to boost economic growth and effectively implement the post-2015 development agenda, including by addressing unemployment, high debt and declining living standards. Economic cooperation should be guided by seeking common ground and mutual benefits and not by employing protectionist practices and promoting unfair competition. The Russian Federation attached great importance to collective action with its neighbours and major partners. The Eurasian Economic Union, which began its activities on 1 January 2015, would make a significant contribution to the elimination of barriers and the promotion of economic growth. The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union set the stage for a pan-European economic space, from Lisbon to Vladivostok. A starting point for that endeavour could be the establishment of a Eurasian Economic Union-European Union free trade zone. ECE could help to bring the pan-European region to a new level of economic interaction, in particular through its work on trade and transport connectivity, the promotion of sustainable energy and its work on transboundary environmental problems, which

could bridge various integration processes. Activities related to innovation and public-private partnerships, sustainable forest management and housing also deserved further impetus. The Russian Federation remained committed to continuing its support of cooperation within ECE, including through its annual voluntary contribution of $1.2 million.

6. The Deputy Minister for Economy and Development of Turkmenistan, Serdar Atayev, underlined that cooperation was the basis for prosperity at all levels. Given the complexity of the tasks ahead, there was a need for creating a suitable basis for cooperation. ECE provided a flexible platform for cooperation, allowing for a rapid reaction to pressing issues. The current stage of socioeconomic development in Turkmenistan was characterized by high growth rates. There was a number of ongoing initiatives on energy, privatization, electricity, transport, infrastructure and innovation that would support further development. Turkmenistan aimed at bringing the national interest together with the interest of the global community as a whole. Safe transport and securing reliable supplies of energy was essential to global development. Turkmenistan had proposed a substantive dialogue on the diversification of energy export routes. Turkmenistan was involved in a number of other issues with global significance, such as food security, climate change and the rational use of water resources, including preservation of the Caspian Sea. Turkmenistan was an active participant in global processes and would continue to cooperate at all levels, including with ECE.

7. The Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of International Organization Affairs of the Department of State of the United States of America, Nerissa J. Cook, stressed the importance of the work of ECE in today's world of profound technological and economic changes. ECE had shown a long-standing commitment to sustainable development. For example, 10 years ago, ECE launched the strategy for education for sustainable development, which provided current and future generations with valuable knowledge on sustainable development issues. The work of ECE was therefore very relevant in view of the post-2015 development agenda, to which the United States was very committed. ECE was well placed to play a significant role as a regional platform to support the implementation of the sustainable development goals, including by setting standards and conducting regional performance reviews. Monitoring progress across countries would be critical and should be done on the basis of what already exists, to avoid duplication of effort. Regionally-based monitoring also provided an additional layer of accountability and credibility. The positive track record of ECE in monitoring the Millennium Development Goals could be drawn on for the sustainable development goals. It was imperative that linkages with the other regional commissions and international organizations be strengthened, as was being done with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, while seeking to avoid duplication of efforts. The experience of ECE in capacity-building in statistics could also be shared with other regions and could serve as a broader model for other regional commissions. ECE also had a role to play in integrating with the private sector in a more robust way, which was essential to realizing the sustainable development goals. In an era in which 53 of the 100 largest economies in the world were companies and one company alone could reach 4 billion customers, which was nearly 60 per cent of the global population, working with the private sector was no longer a luxury but a necessity. In addition, official development assistance was no longer the main driving force for international giving. ECE work on public-private

partnerships contributed to engaging the private sector in realizing development goals.

8. The Acting Director of the Directorate-General for the Environment of the European Commission, Nicholas Hanley, stressed the commitment of the European Union and its member States to meeting an ambitious post-2015 development agenda and highlighted a number of elements that were essential in that regard. Effective implementation required national ownership and accountability. Moreover, policy coherence was crucial to integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at all stages of national and international policymaking. A new global partnership for sustainable development was needed to implement the new agenda, but partnerships with civil society, parliaments, local authorities and the private sector were also needed. In the ECE region, there was a wealth of experience in developing such collaborative networks and alliances, which could be shared with other regions. Implementing monitoring and review mechanisms to ensure accountability would be essential to following up on the post-2015 development agenda. Synergies and cooperation between existing frameworks at the global, regional and national levels should be strengthened. At the global level, the key oversight role of the high-level political forum was emphasized. The regional level could provide a useful platform for peer review and learning and could encourage countries to set ambitious targets and stimulate implementation. Work at the regional level could also help to ensure that progress was made on transboundary issues and that regionally shared targets were met.

9. The Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, Mahmud Mammad-Guliyev, emphasized the importance of setting measurable targets to achieve specific results in the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda. A strong framework for monitoring and review was crucial to effective follow-up. As an emerging donor, Azerbaijan was engaged in South-South triangular cooperation. Transport and information and communications technology played a significant role in socioeconomic development. The trans-Eurasian information super highway project was a significant public-private partnership project that would make a positive contribution to the post-2015 development agenda. Azerbaijan proposed to link that project with the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation. Azerbaijan welcomed the opening for global accession of the ECE multilateral environmental agreements but remained confident that obtaining meaningful results in the region primarily rested on the participation of all members of the region. Addressing transboundary issues regarding environmental protection and water use were of paramount importance. Azerbaijan called on ECE, therefore, to encourage neighbouring riparian countries to accede to the existing multilateral environmental agreements under ECE. Conflicts remained a major impediment to regional cooperation and the comprehensive development of individual member States. Respect for territorial integrity and the internationally recognized borders of member States were essential preconditions to cooperation, integration and further development. There was an urgent need, therefore, for the immediate resolution of the military conflict that made it difficult for Azerbaijan to address the challenges reflected in the sustainable development agenda. Corruption and other organized crimes, such as tax evasion and money-laundering, were among the other significant threats to the successful implementation of the post-2015 development agenda that needed to be addressed.

10. The Ambassador/Deputy Permanent Representative of Germany to the United Nations Office at Geneva, Thomas Fitschen, speaking on behalf of the State Secretary of the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety of Germany, Jochen Flasbarth, emphasized that 2015 was a crucial year for the international negotiations on climate change and sustainable development. The ECE region, which accounted for about half of global greenhouse gas emissions, carried a special responsibility. The 17 proposed sustainable development goals included ambitious targets, which required transboundary cooperation and capacity-building. ECE could support its member States in the transformation towards sustainable development by developing a common understanding on goals and reviewing the coherence of national strategies, involving the private sector to trigger sustainable investments and business models and monitoring and reviewing the implementation of global policies at the regional level. ECE was well positioned to contribute in all of those areas, for example, by developing standards for energy efficiency in buildings or through the work that is done under its environmental conventions. Relevant experiences from the region should be shared with other United Nations regional commissions.

11. The ensuing discussion revolved around several themes. In particular, one or more speakers and participants raised the following points:

(a) The proposed sustainable development goals had set out an ambitious agenda in response to the global challenges of poverty, climate change and sustainable development. The new framework would guide national policies and international commitments and coordination mechanisms.

(b) Implementing the new development framework would require breaking down sectoral silos, ensuring national ownership and a new global partnership. The rule of law, human rights and participatory democracy would enable progress towards sustainable societies.

(c) ECE was well placed to play a leading role in the implementation of the sustainable development goals in its areas of expertise in the region and beyond. ECE had a competitive edge as a multisectoral, results-oriented organization that helped to translate global goals into specific action at the national and local levels through standards, norms, guidelines and policies. Thus, ECE also contributed to regional economic integration and stability.

(d) Effective data and monitoring systems were significant drivers for the implementation of sustainable development, to which ECE would continue to contribute.

(e) Mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing the post-2015 development agenda should be developed on the basis of existing instruments, which should be linked in order to avoid duplication of efforts. One proposal was to consider a meeting of all bureaux of ECE involved in the elaboration of legal instruments to discuss related issues. Existing data and analytical activities of United Nations organizations should be better connected.

(f) Forging partnerships with civil society, the private sector and other United Nations and regional organizations was essential in order to engage all stakeholders in effecting change. The process of strengthening the involvement of civil society and the private sector in national and international policymaking should therefore be continued. Non-State actors should also be involved in the

post-2015 monitoring and review mechanisms at the national, regional and global levels, which would enhance the depth and credibility of such mechanisms.

(g) ECE cooperation within the United Nations system and with other international and regional bodies should be continued and strengthened in order to pool expertise and realize synergies, including, for example to cooperate more closely with the United Nations Environment Programme on environmental matters.

(h) Building specific partnerships with the private sector to achieve specific objectives was a significant means of mobilizing knowledge, technology and financing. The private sector could benefit from such partnerships by improving corporate sustainability practices. ECE could coordinate efforts for an early warning system regarding the implementation of the sustainable development goals, which would help the private sector to focus its attention in that regard. In order to harness the full involvement of businesses, it was necessary to remove overly restrictive regulations that might act as barriers to private sector engagement.

(i) ECE should improve its outreach towards the public, parliaments, companies, policymakers at all levels and other stakeholders about its work and tangible impact on people's lives. Best practices and results of ECE work should be shared with other parts of the world and with the other United Nations regional commissions.